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*Social Literacies:
Critical Approaches to Literacy in
Development, Ethnography and Education*

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Introduction

The final Section brings together the assumptions and concepts employed in the earlier sections and proposes a critical framework for further study. It critically examines some key theoretical positions that, I argue, have dominated literacy studies for too long. Against these I argue for an 'ideological' model of literacy that is methodologically and theoretically sensitive to local variation in literacy practices and that is able to comprehend people's own uses and meanings of reading and writing. The message of this last section of the book, then, is that in order to understand the nature and role of literacy practices in real social contexts, we need to challenge the theories on which much assumed 'common sense' about literacy has rested and to make explicit the premises on which an alternative account can be developed. The chapters above, while attempting to free us from some of the restrictive traditions and conventions traditionally associated with literacy studies, represent mainly an attempt to build on the positive work in the field of linguistics, anthropology and education cited there in order to suggest new directions for literacy research and practice.

Chapter 7: A Critical Look at Walter Ong and the 'Great Divide'

This chapter attempts a further elaboration of the theoretical debates over a 'great divide' through critical analysis of the work of a key author in the field – Walter J. Ong. Ong has been extremely influential in literacy studies, reinforcing the 'great divide' between orality and literacy and making grand claims for the social and

cognitive consequences of literacy. In the USA in particular, his analysis provides the theoretical underpinnings for a great deal of work in both theoretical and practical spheres. The article summarizes Ong's arguments and then analyzes them at three levels: methodological, empirical and theoretical. At a methodological level, it is argued that Ong employs something of the 'if I were a horse' thinking that characterized nineteenth-century travellers' tales and anthropology: the basic problem here is that if the observer has no first-hand experience of the people whose thinking he is trying to replicate imaginatively, then in effect the account becomes a reflection of the writer's own culture and own thinking. With regard to accounts of supposedly 'purely oral' culture, Ong's argument also encounters the fundamental contradiction that he himself is writing from within a literate culture. The social evolutionary character of the accounts is also examined critically. At an empirical level, Ong's account of 'literate society' turns out on examination to be an account of the particular literate practices of a subculture within his own society, specifically the academic subculture of which he himself is a part. Furthermore, the accounts we have of other societies, with different 'mixes' of oral/literate practices, suggests that they do not lack the logic, detachment, self-consciousness, abstraction and the other fundamental cognitive and social abilities that Ong attributes to (academic) literacy. At a theoretical level, as we have seen, recent scholarship has suggested that it is more precise to think of oral/literate interactions, rather than to search for pure examples of either orality or literacy on their own. Ong, nevertheless, argues that literacy in itself is unique and different in kind from orality, in that it 'fixes' the evanescent nature of sound and experience. I argue in contrast that literacy is not unique in this regard: language in general and various forms of picturing, rituals, stories etc., share this characteristic. Arguments about the particular character of alphabetic writing systems are also examined and it is argued that all writing systems have conventions that approximate to precision while retaining much ambiguity: there appears to be a continuum in the ways in which coding systems represent the various features of sound systems, rather than a great divide as Ong argues. It is difficult to envisage how one system might have greater consequences for fundamental cognitive processes than another.

The reason for dwelling on Ong's arguments in such detail is that they often underlie less self-conscious accounts of literacy in the

fields of education and development and in the ethnographic and empirical descriptions of literacy practices. The examination of literacy practices in earlier chapters derived, to some extent, from the critical encounter with theoretical arguments such as those of Ong and Goody. The positive message that I hope emerges from this book builds upon that critical encounter.

Chapter 8: Literacy Practices and Literacy Myths

The final chapter takes note of some recent works on literacy that have moved towards the greater awareness of 'context' advocated here. However, it warns that in some cases the shift may be more rhetorical than real: in a number of those works 'context' is often treated as either a narrow account of specific interactions or networks, or as an 'add on', once the basic features of literacy have been described. In challenging this failure to come to grips with the full meaning of 'context' and its significance for literacy studies, despite some notable advances and developments from earlier perspectives, the chapter clarifies the concepts of 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models. It is argued that these models do not set up a dichotomy in the field, rather that all models of literacy can be understood within an ideological framework and that those termed 'autonomous' only appear on the surface to be neutral and value free. In this sense, it is those who want to retain an 'autonomous' view of literacy who are responsible for a dichotomy: those who subscribe to the ideological model do not deny the significance of technical aspects of reading and writing, such as decoding, sound/shape correspondence and reading 'difficulties', rather they argue that these features of literacy are always embedded in particular social practices: the socialization process through which reading and writing are acquired and the power relations between groups engaged in differing literacy practices are central to the understanding of specific issues and 'problems'.

The chapter also returns to the question raised by many literacy scholars and summarized in the Introduction of the book, concerning the difference between oral and literate modes. Again it is argued that these differences have been overstated; that very often characteristics attributed to one mode rather than the other are in fact features

of the social context in which they are employed and that in other contexts those features might be attributed to another mode. Examples of cohesion in oral discourse and of supposedly 'oral-like' features in written discourse are discussed with particular reference to the work of Deborah Tannen. In conclusion it is claimed that the notion of a 'great divide' still persists within many accounts in the field, even though it has often been rejected at the overt level and despite the fact that in its most extreme forms – as evident in the work of Goody, Ong etc. – the problems it raises are apparent. Recent developments in methodology, in ethnography and in discourse analysis, combined with recent developments in theory in anthropology and in sociolinguistics, may provide a framework from which to research literacy practices in a depth and detail that will allow for future generalizations that avoid the problems of the 'great divide' and of the 'autonomous' model. The arguments and the examples described in this book are intended to help us move in that direction.

7 A Critical Look at Walter Ong and the 'Great Divide'

The work of Walter Ong, particularly his version of the 'great divide' between orality and literacy, has dominated the approach to literacy, not only in academic circles, but also in more powerful domains, such as the 'reading' lobby, development agencies, and those responsible for schooling and 'illiteracy' programmes, particularly in the USA. It is important to confront Ong's views directly, to test their validity against current research and theory, and to ask why they are still so powerful. This chapter is intended to provide a few initial suggestions as to what such a project might involve.

Ong's views have been expressed over a number of years in a variety of books and articles, but the most accessible and 'popular' version has been his *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), and I will use this as a reference point, partly because it stands as a focus of much else in the field.

Ong argues that our knowledge of oral culture is distorted by literacy. We need, therefore, to think ourselves out of literacy and into a purely oral world if we are to be able to understand fully the real significance of literacy itself and the differences entailed when it supersedes orality. The characteristics of the oral world that he discovers using this method are that it is 'formulaic', conservative, 'close to the human lifeworld', 'agonistically toned', empathetic, homeostatic, situational, and involves memorization by formula rather than verbatim. The literate world is the opposite to all of these things: it is abstract, analytic, distancing, objective and separative. The consequence of these differences between orality and literacy is that it becomes possible to distinguish between two major cultural forms in the history of human development – what Ong calls 'verhomotor' cultures and 'high-technology' cultures. The former are word-oriented, the latter object-oriented. The oral world is commu-

nal, externalized, less introspective. The explanation for these differences lies in a basic principle that distinguishes orality as such from literacy as such. This is the fact that sound only exists in its departing, it cannot be held or captured, but is always in process. It is also an 'interior' process. Marks on visual, external surfaces (i.e., writing) are isolating, dissecting, analytical, associated with other senses in a way that sound is not and, crucially, appear able to 'fix' impressions in a way that sound does not.

The consequences of these fundamental differences between sound and vision are that the advent of literacy, with its dependence on the visual, leads to a 'restructuring of consciousness'. Literacy provides for 'context-free language', 'autonomous discourse', and 'analytical thought'. It is essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentialities that remain unrealized in the oral world. Like Goody and Watt (1969), Ong sees the possibility that writing provides of laying two 'texts' side by side, thereby generating critical skills, the ability to examine things separately from their social context, the possibility of differentiating between myth and history. Communication becomes less embedded in the social pressures of the immediate moment.

Faced with the grand claims made by Ong for 'literacy', it is obviously crucial to determine just what 'literacy' itself is. Ong addresses this issue directly and answers the question 'What is writing?' with reference to his previous insistence upon the phenomenological nature of sound and sight. 'True' writing is defined as not the representation of things but the representation of sounds. It therefore excludes pictograms, semiotic marks of various kinds, syllabaries, and even the Semitic alphabet, which comes close to 'true' writing but lacks representation for vowel sounds and therefore calls upon exterior knowledge from the reader. The vocalic alphabet was a vital breakthrough in resolving the technical problem of representing sound graphically, because it needed no extra-textual information in order for the reader to decode the signs. It was therefore most remote from the lifeworld, it analyzed sound most abstractly into purely spatial components. It is at this point that Ong's argument moves from an apparently technical analysis of the nature of writing systems to a historical and social analysis of the nature of human mentality. According to Ong (and to similar authors such as Goody and Olson discussed more fully elsewhere in this volume) literacy in such a writing system variously 'enables', 'facili-

tates', 'fosters', etc., the shift from a 'prelogical' to a 'logical' mentality: the distinction of myth from history, the growth of science, objectivity, critical thought and abstraction. It is on these assumptions that claims regarding 'Western' superiority are founded. Whatever precise linguistic analyses may be embedded within this account of literacy and orality, they are popularly developed in political and ideological terms that assume power to define and shape the world itself.

It is for this reason, rather than simply the 'academic' interest of the analyses, that it is important to pay attention to Ong's work directly. Indirectly it is already likely that it lies beneath many 'folk' assumptions about literacy.

I shall consider Ong's views on three levels: methodological, empirical, and theoretical. The methodology he employs is mainly deductive: it has affinities with the nineteenth-century methodology in social anthropology known as 'if I were a horse' thinking (discussed above in chapter 4), whereby the observer puts himself or herself into the position of the imagined subject. The classic problem with such a method, which ultimately in some form at least remains crucial to any interpretative understanding, arises, when the observer knows nothing about the culture and context of those whose thinking he or she is assuming to represent. In Ong's case, not only does he know little about the rich variety of different cultures that he aggregates together as 'oral', but according to his own argument he cannot ever know about them, since he himself is from a 'literate' culture. If he is right that writing has such deep effects on consciousness as to distort our view of orality, then Ong, too, is trapped in his own literate mentality: an effort of the will, or imagination, seems hardly enough to counteract the profound effects that he himself attributes to this. Where he does appeal to knowledge of actually existing 'oral' societies, he faces two major problems. First, there are few such societies in the present world, since most people have had some contact, however minimal, with forms of literacy, whether in the shape of labels on clothes, street signs, or more formal procedures as found in westernized schooling. More problematic at a methodological level is the problem that Ong appears to want to use present-day 'oral' cultures, if such could be found, as evidence for the nature of *past* societies. This, too, has its roots in nineteenth-century thought, notably that the history of the world was laid out like geological strata and one had only to investigate contemporary 'primitive' societies to find layers of our own past that western society had

evolved beyond. Social anthropology in this century has demonstrated that the richness and variety of non-technologically advanced societies should be taken as evidence of the multifarious directions of 'evolution': the unilinear, evolutionary model is no longer tenable and contemporary societies can no longer be viewed as evidence of 'the past'.

There is also a circularity in the arguments used by Ong (and similar authors) when examples are adduced that would disprove their claims for literacy. When Kathleen Gough, for instance, arguing against Goody's insistence on the scientific implications of literacy, points out that literacy in early India did not lead to 'Western-type' science (Gough, 1968), Goody responds that this then must have been a 'restricted' form of literacy (Goody, 1968). By definition, then, most actual literacy practice has been 'restricted' since it has not fulfilled the claims made by these 'great divide' authors. Ong himself argues that where features he ascribes to orality are found still in fully literate societies, then they must be 'residual oral' features. Conversely, where 'literate' features appear in 'oral' societies, they must be due to 'literate' influence. There is no way, within this circular model, of testing the claims put forward.

Finally, it is not clear whether the claims for mental progress are attributable to individual cognitive states or to whole cultures. What, precisely, is the unit of study? Are we concerned with subcultures (which appears to be the case when Ong writes of the importance of certain post-medieval literacy developments), with aspects of all persons, with periods, or with whole eras of human development? The claims appear to be pitched at the highest level, but the arguments slide from one to another.

This also links with the major empirical weakness of the argument. What Ong is claiming for 'literate society' appears to be the particular conventions, beliefs and practices of certain subcultures, most notably the western, academic subculture of which he himself is a part. The 'rationality', 'detachment' and 'objectivity' of the members of this group are, of course, ideals and goals rather than empirical accounts of what they have actually achieved. There is some confusion in treating these aims as though they were empirical evidence for the actual consequences of literacy. Similarly, what empirical evidence we do have from societies with different or less permeating literacies is that they do not necessarily lack the characteristics of 'logic',

'abstraction', etc., that Ong attributes to literacy. Finnegan (1973, 1988) and others (Halverson, 1992a and b) in their accounts of 'oral' literature and anthropologists (Bloch, 1975) describing, for instance, courts of law and political speeches in small-scale societies, have produced ample evidence of these deeper skills. Indeed, it would be surprising if it were otherwise, since these are cornerstones of communicability across cultures and, at their most profound, not subject to cultural variability, whatever variations there may be in surface forms. All people have conventions for formalizing, distancing, analyzing, separating, holding some things constant, acting as if the evanescent world could be 'fixed'.

Having examined some of the methodological and empirical objections to Ong's position and, by association, that of many other writers on literacy, I would finally like to consider some theoretical issues. The primary point of importance here, and which runs through the argument of this book, is that the characteristics which Ong would attribute to literacy are in fact those of the social context and the specific culture in which the literacy being described is located. The emphasis on 'detachment', for instance, is a feature of particular social situations, exemplified perhaps in our culture within certain academic uses of literacy (although not exclusively) and in others through such institutions as courts, public speaking and oral academic discourse. From a theoretical standpoint, it is also incorrect to conceive of 'literacy' in isolation from other media of communication. Literacy practices are always embedded in oral uses, and the variations between cultures are generally variations in the *mix* of oral/literate channels. Even within the academy, Ong's major exemplar of the literate mentality, we find conventions for mixing oral and literate discourse: lectures, seminars, and tutorials are both oral situations and 'literacy events', in Shirley Brice Heath's sense (1983) – the lecture includes literacy both in the hearers taking notes and the deliverer reading the paper, while seminars frequently consist of both discussion and note-taking variously intermixed. The form of speech may well be affected by conventions associated with writing, but conversely the form of *writing* – particularly note-taking and seminars and lectures, discussed already in the introduction – is influenced by the oral context in which it is performed. From a theoretical perspective, then, if we are formulating proposals for research into literate practices, we need to employ a model of communication that takes full account of this mix.

The crux of Ong's claim for literacy was, as we have seen, that it uniquely appears to 'fix' the evanescent nature of sound and of experience. I would argue, however, that language itself already has this quality in its oral dimension, namely of classifying and thereby 'fixing' the continuum of experience. The relationship between a spoken word or a sound and its referent is similar to that which Ong claims is distinctive to the relationship between a written word and its referent: in both cases the signs – whether visual or oral/aural – work at a level of abstraction in representing meaning. Fixing, separation, abstraction all happen without literacy. Furthermore, pictures, ritual, stories all transform the evanescent to the quasi-permanent, distance us from the immediate, heighten consciousness and so forth. Ong would argue that it is the specific nature of the coding system – the consistent relationship between signs and sounds – employed in vocalic, alphabetic literacy that distinguishes it from these other forms. In pictographic systems, for instance, the code remains unfixed (there is no consistent relationship between signs and sounds). Likewise, in non-vocalic alphabets where vowels are not indicated by separate letters the coding system is thereby incomplete. It is, however, not clear why Ong should draw the line at this point. Even the vocalic alphabet, in which vowel sounds are indicated as well as consonants, is not a perfect 'coding' system: the context is still necessary to get the sounds right, there is considerable ambiguity as to how a sign or series of signs should be sounded and extra textual information is necessary here too. An alphabetic script locked away for centuries does not immediately reveal its message or indicate to the reader how to sound out the words. It might be claimed that the linguists' system of 'phonetic' writing, used for transcribing oral language more accurately than everyday alphabets can do, comes closest to Ong's ideal of a 'perfect' coding system. But this system too operates within precise and limited conventions and for specific aims. Moreover, no one would claim that the use of such a phonetic writing system has profound implications for cognitive processes – it is just a technical device for doing a particular job. There is, then, a continuum in coding systems and there appears to be no theoretical reason, empirical evidence, or clear methodology that would justify drawing the line between one system and another and then making large claims for cognition, logic, etc., on either side of that line.

Ong's thesis, then, appears to have little value in the investigation of the relationship between orality and literacy. We would do better

to look for more specific relationships between literacy events and literacy practices on the one hand, and oral conventions on the other. In the project of investigating these relationships on a cross-cultural basis and in such a way as to yield fruitful generalizations, Ong's thesis does not provide much help and is, indeed, likely to mislead the unwary researcher. And yet it continues to exercise considerable influence, indirect as much as direct, in the field of Literacy Studies. For this reason it is worthy of attention, if only to develop ways of moving beyond it.

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